Seizures and Epilepsy

What are seizures?
Seizures are caused by sudden excessive electrical activity in the brain. A child who has a seizure may lose consciousness (black out) for a short time; shake strongly all over his body; have unusual, repeated body movements; or stare blankly into space.

What is epilepsy?
Epilepsy is defined as 2 or more seizures without fever or another reason of any type.

How common are seizures in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs)?
About 1 in 4 children with ASDs has seizures. Seizures often start in early childhood or the early teen years. Children with ASDs who have a lower IQ or cannot speak are at highest risk for seizures.

How does a doctor diagnose seizures?
Children with ASDs often have repetitive movements and staring episodes. A doctor can often tell the difference between repetitive movements, which may be repetitive behaviors, and movements that may be seizures. A test called an electroencephalogram (EEG) can record electrical activity in the brain and help a doctor check for seizures. The EEG can only record if a seizure is happening at the time that the EEG is actually done; it cannot tell if seizures are happening at any other time. Sometimes longer EEGs are needed to see if spells are seizures.

Should every child with an ASD have an EEG?
Not all children with ASDs need an EEG. A doctor will likely order an EEG if a child is having spells that the doctor thinks are seizures or in some cases, if a child has recently lost language skills. The EEG is usually done with the child awake and asleep. There are different types of EEGs, some completed during a shorter visit to the hospital, others done overnight in the hospital or at home. The doctor will determine the type of EEG that is appropriate for each child.

How are seizures treated?
In most cases, medicines called anticonvulsants can help control seizures. These medicines can usually reduce the number of seizures, but they cannot always get rid of them completely. Some children have EEG results that are not normal, but they do not have visible seizures. It is not yet clear if anticonvulsants can help these children.

For more information about seizures, contact the Epilepsy Foundation (www.epilepsyfoundation.org).